

**The Killing Joke:
Why Batman Doesn't Kill the Joker**

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

by

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper was to take an academic look at the reasons why Batman does not kill his deadly arch-nemesis, the Joker, despite his many opportunities to do so. The project looked at the question from various perspectives, including canon (in-story), criminal justice, psychology, and philosophy. The research looked at all different versions of the Caped Crusader, from his first appearance in comic books to the 1960s TV show to Christopher Nolan's Dark Knight Trilogy, with a focus on canon comic books. While this is a question that does not have one perfect answer, it does provide a great opportunity to examine one item from unique vantage points in order to both gain further knowledge of the subject at hand (Batman's refusal to kill the Joker) and real-world applications of other topics (such as vigilantism, the philosophical Trolley Problem, etc.). Batman will not kill the Joker for a number of reasons, and this paper examined each of them fully.

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Introduction

Batman killed the Joker. In fact, Batman has killed the Joker a few times over the better part of the last century and the Joker has died an even greater number of times overall. The Joker is still around, though, and is still alive in mainstream comics. As far as continuing storylines go, the Joker is generally alive and well (or at least alive; it is unlikely that anyone would ever consider the murderous Clown Prince of Crime known as the Joker to be “well”, regardless of his physical state), and when he is not alive in these stories, it is not usually because Batman killed him. Batman has killed him, though. The times that Batman has killed the Joker are known within comic circles, but lesser known to the general public. These instances do occur, but generally are not considered to be canonical. As far as main storylines go, Batman does not kill the Joker. This paper looks to examine the reasons behind this by taking aspects of a number of different disciplines and eventually combining them to make a conclusive hypothesis of why Batman does not (officially) kill the Joker.

The term *canon* is used throughout this paper to describe events that happen within the fictional realm of the Batman universe and that are considered to be a part of the fictional history and timeline of events for the character. Not everything that happens involving Batman, or comic book characters in general, is considered to be part of the canon. A great example of the difference between canon and non-canon is *Detective Comics* #27 in the New 52 reboot of the Batman series. The 27th issue was a special anniversary edition of *Detective Comics*, as this was the same issue number that Batman made his first appearance in and the company was in the midst of celebrating the character’s 75th anniversary. To commemorate the special event, DC Comics published the issue containing a number of special, non-canon Batman stories. One of these stories, “Twenty-Seven”, takes place 200 years in the future. Throughout the course of the

story, readers see a new, unidentified man learn that he is to become the new Batman. It is revealed to him from the then-current Batman that the original Batman came to the realization that any one person only had about 27 years of good crime fighting in them to make use of, so he created a program that initiated a new Batman every 27 years (Snyder, Murphy, Hollingsworth, & Wands, 2014). This story took a character, or, rather, the idea of a character (Batman), and provided audiences with a hypothetical story set in a universe that is fictional within the confines of the larger fictional Batman universe.

A good way to think of it is like looking at non-comic literature. Historical essays and works of nonfiction would be considered canonical to the real world, as they depict what is really happening. Works of fiction would be considered non-canon, as their events are not actually taking place. While comics as a whole are generally works of fiction in and of themselves, their contents must not be viewed from the perspective of the real world, but rather from the perspectives of their own universes. In the Batman universe, the accepted story of his origins is considered to be canon; that is to say that in his world, the origin story involving his parents being murdered when he was young and this event becoming the catalyst for his life as a vigilante is part of his history and background (Kane & Finger, 1940b). Another author could come in, however, and write a story about how his parents were not killed, but rather removed from their places of high esteem and thrust downward on the social ladder, and proceed to tell the story of how his parents' unfair treatment led him to hate the upper class. While this story may be interesting, it would not be considered to have actually occurred within Batman's universe (unless otherwise specified) and thus would be considered non-canonical. Canon and non-canon sources will be utilized within this research, but canon sources are what the arguments for why Batman does not kill the Joker will generally be based upon.

Over the past 75 years, Batman has appeared in a number of different forms across all types of media. He has been the subject of comic books, movies, cinema serials, television shows, and video games. While all of these portrayals generally include the same Batman in the same fictional Gotham-centric universe, only the stories appearing in comic books are generally considered to be canon and, even then, not all stories appearing in comic books are considered to be part of the canon. Much like the idea that all squares are rectangles, but not all rectangles are squares, essentially all canon stories occur within comic books, but not all stories that occur within comic books are canon. Depictions and facts or story points within other media can occasionally make their way into canon, but this is rare. An example would be the creation of one of the Joker's sidekicks, Harley Quinn. Harley Quinn was created for the television series *Batman: The Animated Series*, but the character turned out to be so popular that comic writers introduced her into the canon comic world of Batman as well (Smith, 2012).

This paper will discuss many different forms of Batman to create a more complete view of the issue, but matters of definitiveness regarding his lack of killing will generally stem from the canonical version of Batman seen in comic books. Even this Batman, however, changes over time, usually as a result of retconning. Retconning, which Dictionary.com states is short for retroactive continuity, is the process of an author making a change to a past event or a character's previously described history with said change becoming the new official record ("retcon," n.d.). Since retconning is an accepted entity within the comic book world, all of the Batman representations that appear in canon comic book stories will be grouped together as the main Batman that is discussed. When referring to the character in this paper, the term "Batman" will indicate the canon Batman just described, whereas other Batman portrayals will be specified as they are presented. For example, when discussing Adam West's portrayal of Batman in the 1966

film and television series, it will be made apparent that it is that Batman that is being discussed and not the main one defined herein.

When considering the question of why Batman does not just kill the Joker for good, many different perspectives can be used, and a number of them are utilized throughout this paper. The question will first be examined in the context of the story. Batman gives reasons for why he does not kill the Joker; supporting characters do the same. The reasons given, as well as further evidence and supporting materials, are presented later on. This paper will examine the topic through the lens of the social sciences, namely the fields of criminal justice and criminology, psychology, and philosophy, to go outside of the story and look at the real-world applications that Batman killing the Joker would have. The field of criminal justice and criminology will help provide insight into theories on vigilantism and how these theories play a role in answering the question at hand from a societal point of view, while psychological and philosophical theories will help to understand the issue on an individual level as it relates to Batman.

As each of these perspectives is examined and refined, a more conclusive and holistic picture begins to form. There are many reasons why Batman does not kill the Joker once and for all. Some reasons are more important, while others may appear to be somewhat trivial or inconsequential in nature. Each reason plays a part, however, and those reasons are now presented together for consideration.

A Brief History of Batman

Creation of the Character

Batman is a fictional character within the DC Comics universe. Bob Kane and Bill Finger created the character, originally called “the Bat-Man” in the earliest issues, and their new creation made its debut in 1939. Batman’s official introduction to the comic world came in May

1939's *Detective Comics* #27 and his first story was "The Case of the Chemical Syndicate". Mr. Kane came up with the concept and early drawings, and Mr. Finger acted as the ghost-writer to script the stories. Bob Kane had the initial idea for the Batman character at the age of 18 and is given most, and oftentimes all, of the credit for creating the character, but Bill Finger's role in the refining process and helping to build a universe around the character should not be understated (Boxer, 1998; Szerdy, 2012).

Batman was created to act as an opposite to his superhero predecessor, Superman. While Superman operated in the light of day, Batman stuck to the shadows and did his work at night. The former was all about action and getting things done; not unintelligent, he relied more on brawn nonetheless. The latter was the World's Greatest Detective; he was at the peak of human physical capability, yet he still focused on solving problems with his mind (Morrison, 2011).

The idea for Batman was a conglomeration of different aspects of other characters that were prevalent in the early part of the 20th century. Source material included characters from films of the time such as *The Mark of Zorro* and *The Bat Whispers*, a radio program titled *The Shadow*, and even drawings by Leonardo da Vinci. Kane was able to bring all of these elements together in an attempt to create another superhero to replicate the success of Superman, and after Finger made some modifications, the character began to develop into the Caped Crusader of today (Boxer, 1998).

Batman's Origin Story

As a young boy, Bruce Wayne went to the theater with his parents to see a show. On the way home that evening, the three of them cut through Crime Alley, an area of the city known for its rough nature. It was there that a mugger confronted the Wayne family, insisting on collecting their valuables one way or the other. A struggle ensued, and Bruce's parents, Dr. Thomas and

Martha Wayne, were shot to death, leaving a young Bruce crying in despair at the scene of the crime as their attacker fled. This trauma was the catalyst for Bruce Wayne's decision to become a vigilante. A few days after the incident, he made a vow to avenge his parents by waging his own personal war on crime. He travelled the world, learning everything from combat techniques to detective skills, and in the process became one of the most skilled physical combatants in the world and a top-notch scientist, criminologist, and investigator (Kane & Finger, 1940b; Nolan, 2005).

The Caped Crusader

According to the DC Encyclopedia, Bruce Wayne, a genius, millionaire/billionaire (depending on the time period), playboy, philanthropist, and industrialist who inherited his fortune from his deceased parents, is the true identity of the masked vigilante known as the Dark Knight, the Caped Crusader, the World's Greatest Detective, and, most of all, Batman (Jimenez, Beatty, Greenberger, & Wallace, 2004, pp. 38-39). Batman is a vigilante based out of Gotham City who provides his own type of vengeance on the streets (usually) independently of the Gotham City Police Department. Operating out of a cave beneath Wayne Manor, Batman has a base equipped with all that is needed for everything from advanced crime scene and evidence analysis to emergency medical treatment. Filled to the brim with gadgets, computers, vehicles, and souvenirs from friends and foes alike, the Batcave is home to Batman. Gotham's hero is aided in his crusade for justice by a number of allies, despite his solitary nature. His most trusted confidant and aid is his family's long-time butler, Alfred Pennyworth. The Wayne family has employed the Pennyworth family for three generations and have become like family over all of those years (Jimenez et al., 2004, p. 238).

Batman is also aided by his sidekick, Robin, the identity first assumed by character Dick Grayson. The son of trapeze artists in a traveling circus, young Grayson was forced to endure the same tragedy that led Bruce Wayne to become Batman—watching his family die before his very eyes. Bruce Wayne took on the young orphan as his ward, eventually training him to become his sidekick, Robin. As time went on, Dick Grayson eventually left the role of sidekick and transitioned into the superhero Nightwing, in the process cementing his status as one of Batman's closest friends and allies. The second Robin, Jason Todd, was much different. Whereas Dick Grayson was a superb athlete and crime fighter molded in the image of Batman, Jason Todd was the complete opposite. Batman found Jason when Jason was attempting to steal the wheels right out from under the Batmobile, and the Dark Knight took him under his wing in hopes of helping to point his life in a different direction. Sadly, the second Robin would be murdered before he could truly evolve as a person. Once he lost Jason, Batman had no desire to take on another young sidekick. On the contrary, Tim Drake felt that Batman needed a Robin to balance him out, and set out on his goal to become the next Robin by successfully deducing Batman's secret identity (Jimenez et al., 2004, p. 260). The most recent Robin, Damian Wayne, is actually the son that Batman did not know he had until the boy was almost ten. Trained by the League of Assassins, and raised by his mother, Talia al Ghul, Damian has trouble reconciling his training as an assassin with Batman's policy of not killing, something Batman is working very hard to change in the young boy (Morrison, Kubert, Williams III, & Daniel, 2014).

Outside of the cave, Batman works with Commissioner James Gordon of the Gotham City Police Department. Gordon does not approve of the way that Batman carries out his own brand of justice, but he does appreciate the results that Batman provides, especially when he is able to assist with things that the GCPD either cannot or will not do. Despite disapproving of his

tactics, Gordon has developed a close relationship with Batman over the years and they both have helped each other through a number of hard times and difficult situations, oftentimes caused by none other than the Joker (Jimenez et al., 2004, p. 129). Unlike her father, Commissioner Gordon's adopted daughter Barbara is decidedly unopposed to Batman's methods and tactics. So much so, in fact, that she joins his crusade as Batgirl and fights crime alongside him until she is shot and paralyzed by the Joker. After her paralysis, Barbara Gordon still assists the heroes of Gotham as an information broker operating out of the Gotham clock tower, providing much needed technical support and intel to her partners in the field as Oracle (Jimenez et al., 2004, p. 229).

Then and Now

Batman has evolved quite a bit since his first introduction to comic book fans. The Batman of today has one hard limit about what he is willing to do to those who break the law: he will not kill. Batman will injure, Batman will maim, and, occasionally, Batman will even cripple, but Batman will not kill. That is his one rule. That was not always the case, though. When Batman first appeared back in 1939, he was not against killing when he considered it to be the right thing to do, and he even used guns on occasion. For example, in his debut in *Detective Comics* #27, Batman punches a criminal in the face, sending him to his death in a vat of acid, declaring that it was an appropriate end for someone like him (Kane & Finger, 1939e). This would mark the first time Batman killed a criminal. Over the course of his first seven issues in print, Batman killed the man previously mentioned, killed a criminal by throwing him off of a roof during a fight (Kane & Finger, 1939b), pulled a gun on two criminals and threatened to kill them if they did not provide him with the information he desired (Kane & Finger, 1939c), shot

and killed a criminal (albeit a vampire) (Kane & Finger, 1939a), and caused a crook to crash his plane into a body of water, leading to his death (Kane & Finger, 1939d).

Over time, though, Batman evolved to the point of no longer killing. As more time passed, his idea that he should not kill grew from a mere belief into an incredibly strict rule. In 1994's *Knightfall* story arc, the character Azrael attempts to replace a beaten, battered, and broken Bruce Wayne as Batman. During his time under the cowl, Azrael takes a much more lenient approach to the no-kill rule. Dismayed by this revelation, the real Batman decides to take back his rightful place as Gotham's protector, leading to a fight for control of the city between the two Batmen (Moench, Manley, & Rubinstein, 2012). During this fight, Batman tells Azrael, "No, you don't care—but the real Batman does—and the real Batman never kills," (p. 204). Despite his rule about killing, some versions of Batman are a little more forgiving when it comes to allowing others to die through inaction, since this is not technically killing. For example, during a fight with the terrorist Ra's al Ghul, Christian Bale's portrayal of Batman tells him that he will not kill him, but that does not mean that he must save him. He then ejects himself from the train that is about to crash, leaving Ra's to die in the wreck (Nolan, 2005).

In line with his ideas about not killing, Batman is also against using guns, as the only purpose of a gun in a fight is to kill. Toward the end of *The Dark Knight Rises*, Batman says to Selina Kyle (better known as Catwoman), "No guns. No killing," further echoing his beliefs (Nolan, 2012). Another great example of how Batman feels about using guns is seen in the pilot episode of the animated series *Batman Beyond*. The show begins with an older version of Bruce Wayne as Batman. When Batman tries to rescue a kidnapped woman, he has a heart attack midway through and is attacked and beaten down by one of the kidnappers. It is at that moment that Batman picks up a gun that someone else dropped and points it at his attacker, scaring him

off. This one act serves as the catalyst for his retirement, and he hangs up the suit, swearing that he would never allow himself to do that again (Dini, Burnett, & Geda, 1999).

A Brief History of the Joker

Creation of the Character

As with Batman, there is some controversy over who actually created the Joker.

Generally, credit is given to Bob Kane, Bill Finger, and Jerry Robinson. Bob Kane, however, claimed that credit was due only to himself and Finger, saying that Robinson was brought in later, but Finger shared the credit between all three of them, as did Robinson. In Bob Kane's version, the idea of the Joker came from an image of Conrad Veidt, an actor who played in the film *The Man Who Laughed* from the 1920s. Robinson's version plays out a little differently. He claims that he got the idea for the Joker based on an idea of creating a villain that contradicts himself, and that the Joker's comedic aspects would contradict his criminal nature. Once he had the name, he took the inspiration for the character design from a joker card in a deck of playing cards that he had in his apartment. All three men reported different versions of the creation story until their respective deaths, and it is very likely that the absolute truth may never come out. Be that as it may, this paper will credit all three individuals, because regardless of who had the initial idea, all three men were instrumental in bringing the Joker to life in two dimensions (Eason, 2008; Gustines, 2010).

The Joker made his first official appearance in the premiere issue of Batman's self-titled comic book series, *Batman #1*, in the spring of 1940, and appeared in the book's very first story (Kane & Finger, 1940a). In the end of this first issue, the Joker was supposed to die, but an editor saw potential in the villain and a quick change resulted in him surviving that initial

encounter (Gustines, 2010). The Joker has gone on to become Batman's most formidable foe, obsessing over the Dark Knight and trying to outdo him for decades of publication.

The Joker's Origin Story

The Joker's true origin story is just as elusive as trying to figure out who truly deserves credit for creating the character in the first place. The Joker's origin story is not nearly as straightforward as that of the Dark Knight's. While it is true that there are certain aspects of Batman's origin story that sometimes change over time depending on who is writing the story, the overall depiction generally remains the same, regardless of some minor details. The same cannot be said for the Joker. While different origin stories for the character have appeared over the years, it is hard to say that any one of them is an accurate portrayal of his backstory or origin; the Joker is, after all, a notorious liar with little motivation to tell the truth. He stands little to nothing to gain from letting on about his real past and oftentimes simply makes it up on the spot (Langley, 2012).

Heath Ledger's portrayal of the Joker, while not canonical, offered up a number of different histories throughout the course of *The Dark Knight*, showcasing how he has no qualms about making up his past as he goes. Initially, the Joker provides this well-spun tale about how he received his facial scars: His father, he claims, was a drinker. One night, his father was acting a little crazier than usual in his drunkenness and his mother grabbed a knife to defend herself. In retaliation, his father took the knife and used it against his mother, eventually turning it on the Joker. His father repeatedly asked, "Why so serious?" and then stuck the blade of the knife into the Joker's mouth, stating that he was going to put a smile on that face. Later in the film, the Joker offers up a completely different tale. He claims that his scars are the result of his former marriage. His wife was beautiful, but she liked to gamble. After getting caught up in some debt,

some loan sharks cut up her face. The couple could not afford plastic surgery to restore her beauty, so the Joker slit his own face open with a razor blade to try and show her that he did not care about the scars, but she then found him to be hideous and left him. “Now I see the funny side,” he says. “Now I’m always smiling,” (Nolan, 2008).

The Joker himself admits that he is usually unsure of his own past; in *The Killing Joke*, which, ironically, provides the best and most widely accepted origin story to date, he states, “Sometimes I remember it one way, sometimes another . . . If I’m going to have a past, I prefer it to be multiple choice!” which shows just how uncertain any recounts of his past truly are (Moore & Bolland, 2008). This is why it becomes so difficult to actually depict his origins.

The Killing Joke does provide a very detailed history and background as previously mentioned, however, and this story has become broadly accepted as one of the most plausible versions of the Joker’s past, although it obviously lacks a certain degree of definitiveness due to his personality. The revelation of the Joker’s history in this particular story unfolds through flashbacks over the course of the entire graphic novel, switching back and forth between the past and present throughout the book. As this particular story depicts it, the Joker was a struggling, small-time comedian with a pregnant wife and a dilapidated apartment. Going behind his wife’s back, the Joker met up with some criminals and agreed to help them with a job that involved breaking in to one of his former places of employment. At that point in his life, the Joker was not a criminal by any stretch of the imagination, but he felt that he had run out of options and was looking to help them out one time just to get enough money to move his wife and coming child into a nicer apartment and be able to better provide for them. While he was planning the robbery, the police contacted him and informed him that his wife had died in a freak accident when a bottle warmer exploded. Despite being distraught over his wife’s death, the Joker was

still forced into helping the criminals later that same evening. During their attempted break-in, Batman intervened. During the ensuing craziness, the Joker fell into a vat of acid. When he emerged through a sewer drain later on, his skin had been bleached white, his hair turned emerald green, his lips stained blood red, and a permanent grin etched into his face. The combination of the transformation he underwent as a result of falling in the acid and the loss of his wife and unborn child is what finally drove him over the edge and into the realm of insanity; thus, the Joker was born.

Then and Now

The Clown Prince of Crime (one of the Joker's many nicknames) has gone through numerous phases over his criminal career; from a clown that committed small crimes evolved one of the greatest mass murderers of all time. According to the DC Encyclopedia, he reinvents himself each morning when he wakes up (Jimenez et al., 2004). Harley Quinn, a former psychiatrist who was initially tasked with treating the Joker during one of his many stints in Arkham Asylum for the Criminally Insane but eventually falls in love with him and, instead, begins acting as his partner in crime, wrote her thesis on the Joker, describing him as transitioning through evolutions of his own identity. Quinn refers to the Joker's different stages as "superpersonas", claiming that he creates a new, almost completely different, version of himself every couple of years. Later, the Joker, thinking to himself, wonders if he could possibly be anything more than just a "gruesomely scarred, mentally ill man addicted to an endless cycle of self-annihilating violence," (Morrison et al., 2014).

Psychologist and self-proclaimed superherologist Travis Langley explains that the Joker has transitioned through four separate and unique stages of his criminal career: (a) the Ace of Knives, (b) the Clown Prince of Crime, (c) the King of Arkham Asylum, and (d) the Harlequin

of Hate. As the Ace of Knaves, the Joker was a sane killer. His death count was incredibly high, but he was nothing more than your average murderer. His Clown Prince of Crime persona saw him transition from the heinous murderer to a loony clown criminal, focusing on wacky crimes committed with outrageous gags, gadgets, and premises and focusing on stealing and performing crazy criminal acts instead of killing. As this persona faded away, the King of Arkham Asylum stage began. In this stage, the Joker debuted anew as an insane killer, escaping from mental institutions instead of criminal penitentiaries and returning to his mass murdering ways. The fourth stage of the Joker sees the villain as the Harlequin of Hate. This persona portrays a personal killer. While he is no less lethal in this final stage, many of his attacks are more personal and targeted against Batman and other heroes of the story, such as Commissioner Gordon's family (Langley, 2012).

As the Joker has transitioned through these different psyches and personas over the decades, his character has gone from being portrayed as sane to being absolutely insane. The canon stories reflect this new stage of his life, and retcon his history and previous actions to coincide with the fact that he is now represented as being insane. While some doubt his insanity, others feel that it is hard to argue. After all, the Joker once poisoned all of the fish in Gotham with his Joker toxin, retching their faces into horrid smiles not unlike his own, and then attempted to copyright the fish and claim royalties from their use. Many would argue that it does not get much crazier than that (Langley, 2012).

A History of Reprehensible Acts and Lethal Confrontations

The following section will explore a number of different instances of lethal confrontations between Batman and the Joker. In the first, Batman (arguably) kills the Joker. In the second, the ending is both ambiguous and highly controversial. The third is an example of an

instance when Batman wanted so desperately to kill the Joker and almost did, but finally refrained. The last two major examples show instances when the Joker does die, just not at the hands of Batman. Following these main points, other, less major incidents will be discussed briefly to ascertain their relevance to the argument at hand.

***Batman* (Film)**

Tim Burton's 1989 film adaptation of *Batman* was groundbreaking for a number of reasons. First and foremost, it was the first *Batman* film to be produced in more than 20 years. Secondly, it was a staunch departure from the last film; this film had a much darker, more adult tone, whereas its predecessor exemplified the campiness of *Batman* in the 1960s. *Batman* also stands out because it is one of the instances where Batman does conceivably kill the Joker (Burton, 1989; Martinson, 1966).

During the final fight scene of *Batman*, which takes place between Batman and the Joker, Batman is dangling from the side of a building holding on to reporter Vicki Vale to keep her from falling to her death. Meanwhile, the Joker is preparing to enact his escape; his helicopter, which is being operated by some of his henchmen, hovers overhead, releasing a rope ladder for the Joker to climb up to safety. While he is climbing, Batman launches a cable into the air that secures the Joker to a giant statue on the roof of the building. Despite being tied to the statue, the pilots of the helicopter and the Joker still attempt to get away, and in so doing dislodge the statue. The statue, being of considerable weight, is too much for the Joker to support. It ends up pulling him off of the ladder and down to the ground below, where the Joker dies on impact (Burton, 1989).

This film clearly shows the Joker dying, and doing so as the result of Batman's actions. Whether or not this counts as Batman killing the Joker depends on how one would like to define

murder. If murder is defined explicitly as taking another's life, then it could be argued that Batman did not kill the Joker. After all, it was the fall that killed him, and the excessive weight of the statue is what caused his fall. Batman did not pull him off of the rope ladder; Batman did not drag the Joker to the pavement below; the statue did all of this. The only thing Batman did was attempt to restrain the Joker. On the other hand, one may define murder as causing the loss of life. Under this definition, Batman did indeed kill the Joker, as he attached him to the statue that pulled him to his death. There is also a possibility in the middle of these two that could argue that the second definition of murder, where it is murder if one causes the loss of life, could be applied while still clearing Batman because it was the Joker's henchmen trying to pull away in the helicopter that led to the stone loosening and subsequently pulling the villain to his death.

This first example, being a film, is not considered to be canonical and thus does not impact Batman officially killing the Joker for the purposes of this examination. However, it still provides a great example of an instance where the Joker does die, and does so arguably by Batman's own doing. If one chooses to believe that Batman does kill the Joker in this instance, then it can be written off as having not happened in the canon, thus not counting. If one chooses, as the author of this paper does, to argue that Batman does not kill the Joker in this scene, however, then it provides an example of Batman not killing the Joker outside of canon, strengthening the argument.

***Batman: The Killing Joke* (Graphic Novel)**

Batman: The Killing Joke is a graphic novel that epitomizes to a great extent the relationship between Batman and the Joker, as well as one of the Joker's more heinous personal attacks. From the very opening of the book, where we see Batman putting it all out there for the Joker to take or leave, to the revelation of one of the Joker's most revealing origin stories (as was

detailed earlier in this paper), to the very end where no one knows definitively what happened, the relationship between these two larger-than-life figures is never on better display.

The book starts off with Batman visiting the Joker in Arkham Asylum to discuss their relationship:

Hello. I came to talk. I've been thinking lately. About you and me. About what's going to happen to us. In the end. We're going to kill each other, aren't we? Perhaps you'll kill me. Perhaps I'll kill you. Perhaps sooner. Perhaps later. I just wanted to know that I'd made a genuine attempt to talk things over and avert that outcome. Just once. Are you listening to me? It's life and death that I'm discussing here. Maybe my death . . . Maybe yours. I don't fully understand why ours should be such a fatal relationship, but I don't want your murder on my . . . hands. (Moore & Bolland, 2008)

It is at this point that Batman discovers that the person he is talking to is not actually the Joker, but merely a stand in meant to cover up for the Joker's absence. Having escaped Arkham Asylum, the Joker sets out to prove that he is just like everyone else, and that everyone is merely one bad day away from going just as crazy as he is. In order to prove this, the Joker goes to Commissioner Gordon's house, shoots and paralyzes his daughter (who is secretly Batgirl), takes naked pictures of her bleeding, crippled body, and then kidnaps Commissioner Gordon. To enact the latter stage of his plan, the Joker strips Commissioner Gordon down at the abandoned circus the Joker has recently purchased and takes him on a roller coaster ride surrounded by images of his maimed and helplessly nude daughter. "There's no difference between me and everyone else!" the Joker exclaims; "All it takes is one bad day to reduce the sanest man alive to lunacy," (Moore & Bolland, 2008). It is around this point that Batman has finally tracked down the Joker and is pursuing him. As Batman releases Commissioner Gordon from the cage that he

was being held in, the police commissioner tells Batman that he has to bring Joker in by the book to prove to him that their way works and that the Joker is not right. When Batman finally comes face to face with the Joker, he offers to help him, to rehabilitate him. He also states that he does not want to kill the Joker, or to be killed by the Joker, but that they are nearing a point where that will be one of the only options they have left. The Joker declines, however. He feels that he has gone too far past the brink, that there is no hope left for him despite Batman's offers of assistance. The story ends with an extremely ambiguous scene in which the Joker tells Batman a joke about two crazy men trying to escape an insane asylum. What happens next is anyone's guess. The final panels show Batman and the Joker both laughing, before Batman reaches a hand out toward the Joker and the lights go out, ending the graphic novel. Either Batman is laughing so hard in this moment he is sharing with the Joker that he leans on him for support, or Batman finally snaps and kills the Joker (Moore & Bolland, 2008).

Originally, the story was not supposed to be considered as canon. Enough of the material from the story, however (such as Barbara's paralysis), made it into the canon Batman universe that the book retroactively became canonized. If the book is taken as canon, then Batman could not have killed the Joker, as the Joker continues to appear in the comics and has not been killed. If it is not canon, however, readers see a possibility that Batman did in fact kill the Joker, although the author of this paper does not believe that to be the case. If Batman were to have killed the Joker in those final pages, it would have proven what the Joker was saying to be true, that all it takes is one bad day to make someone snap and just lose it, going crazy. Instead, it seems more likely that there is a moment, just one, where Batman and the Joker connect on some deep level based off of the chemistry they have formed from feuding and interacting with each other so often over their complex history.

***Batman: Hush* (Graphic Novel)**

Batman: Hush is a graphic novel about a new enemy in Gotham who is operating behind the scenes to try and tear Batman apart piece by piece. Hush, the secretive name given to this new mystery villain, is given Batman's secret identity by the Riddler in the hopes that Hush will use this information to take Batman down for him. One of the many tactics that Hush utilizes, as he knows that Bruce Wayne is secretly Batman, is to make it so that Batman comes across his childhood friend Dr. Tommy Elliott lying lifeless in a dark alley. When Batman finds his dead friend who has been fatally shot, the Joker is standing over the body laughing and holding a gun. This is nearly the breaking point for Batman, who attacks the Joker and truly wants to end his life, but is eventually stopped by Commissioner Gordon before he can get the job done. It is later revealed that Dr. Elliott was Hush all along, that the body Batman found was someone else (Clayface, to be exact, who is another member of Batman's rogues gallery and who, being made completely of clay, has the ability to assume any shape, making him a master of disguise), and that the Joker did not actually kill his friend (Loeb, Lee, & Williams, 2009).

Prior to all of these revelations, there is a time in the story where Batman truly believes that the Joker has taken the life of his former best friend and wants nothing more than to kill him personally. In fact, had it not been for Commissioner Gordon, he probably would have. During the course of this fight with the Joker, Batman recalls all of the horrible things that the Joker has put him through: he shot and paralyzed Barbara Gordon, he shot and killed Commissioner Gordon's second wife, Lt. Sarah Essen, he brutally beat and murdered the second Robin (Jason Todd), he had now seemingly killed Tommy Elliott, and so much more. Batman claims that he takes no responsibility for all of the pain that the Joker has caused, except for the fact that he should have killed him a long time ago. Commissioner Gordon finally convinces Batman not to

kill the Joker, but rarely, if ever, is Batman closer to committing the act than he is in this story (Loeb et al., 2009).

Batman and Son (Graphic Novel)

Batman and Son starts off with a bang—literally. The opening pages jump right into an action scene with no introduction, only to see Batman shoot the Joker in the face with a gun. As shocking as that seems, it appears to be the case. That is, until a few pages later when Robin tells Batman that everyone on the street is talking about it and Batman tells him to let them believe it, clueing the readers in on the fact that things were not as obvious and straightforward as they had seemed. As the story progresses, it is revealed that the person who actually shot the Joker in the face was a cop who was pretending to be Batman as a result of an off-the-books experimental project that the military had conducted in case there was ever a need to replace Batman. Readers also find out that Joker somehow survived the shot to the face, next encountering him when he is going through physical rehabilitation in Arkham Asylum (Morrison et al., 2014).

Batman: The Dark Knight Returns (Graphic Novel)

The Dark Knight Returns is a great example of a story where the Joker dies, but not at the hands of Batman. Taking place in a futuristic world many years from now, *The Dark Knight Returns* is not considered to be canon, but still vividly illustrates the relationship between the two characters and what lengths they will go to in the end, as this story portrays. After the Joker escapes from confinement during a television interview, Batman tracks him down to bring him to justice and the chase leads into a tunnel at an amusement park. Inside of the tunnel, Batman vows that the Joker has taken his last life, and moves in for the kill. Right before he is about to take the Joker's life, though, he reconsiders and backs off, realizing that he still cannot bring

himself to kill the Joker. After Batman hesitates, the Joker kills himself by wrenching his body in a seemingly impossible way and snapping his own neck (Miller, Janson, Varley, & Costanza, 1986a). Once the police, who have already issued an arrest warrant for Batman previous to this incident, find the body, they are sure that Batman killed the Joker, as they were the only two in the tunnel and they do not believe that Joker would have or could have snapped his own neck. Even though Batman did not kill the Joker, he is still blamed for his death (Miller, Janson, Varley, & Costanza, 1986b).

Batman: Arkham City (Video Game)

Batman: Arkham City is the second installment in the *Batman: Arkham* video game series, preceded by *Batman: Arkham Asylum* and succeeded by *Batman: Arkham Origins*. These video games are wonderful resources for digging deep into Batman's psyche and figuring out what drives him, as players are literally put in his shoes inside of the game and play as Batman himself for the duration of the games. This first-person perspective provides a unique type of insight into the character that no other medium can provide.

One of the main tenants of the story in *Arkham City* is that the Joker has been poisoned as a result of his actions in the first game of the series and is trying to blackmail Batman into giving him the cure. As the game is nearing its end, Talia al Ghul stabs the Joker with a sword, appearing to kill him. Batman chastises her, but she argues that it needed to be done and that he would never do it. "There's always a choice," replies Batman. As luck would have it, Clayface was once again pretending to be someone else (this time the Joker), and reveals his true identity after being stabbed (Rocksteady Studios, 2011).

Once the player beats the ensuing boss fight, the final cut scene of the game begins. During this cut scene, some very revealing dialogue takes place between Batman and the Joker:

Joker: Quick! The cure! What are you waiting for?! Come on! I killed your girlfriend, poisoned Gotham, and ho! It's not even breakfast, but so what? We all know you'll save me.

Batman: Every decision you've ever made ends with death and misery. People die; I stop you. You'll just break out and do it again. (Rocksteady Studios, 2011)

Moments after this exchange, the Joker stabs Batman, causing him to drop the vial containing the cure, which subsequently smashes on the ground. With the cure now unavailable, the Joker asks Batman if he is satisfied with himself, to which Batman replies, "Do you want to know something funny? Even after everything you've done, I would have saved you." "That actually is pretty funny!" laughs the Joker, who then takes his final breath and collapses, dead (Rocksteady Studios, 2011). The game ends with Batman carrying the Joker's lifeless body out of Arkham City and delivering it wordlessly to Commissioner Gordon and the Gotham City Police Department. This is yet another example of an instance where the Joker does die, just not by Batman's doing, and Batman even admits that he would have saved him if he could have.

Other Examples

Books could be, and have been, filled with examples and illustrations of the Joker's heinous acts and confrontations he has had with Batman, so it is nearly impossible to include all of them here. Some of the major ones were listed and explained in detail above, but there are always other examples. For instance, the Joker also killed Commissioner Gordon's second wife, Lieutenant Sarah Essen. Not only did the Joker murder her, but he did so in front of a room full of innocent infants that he had kidnapped and used as bait to lure the lieutenant into his trap (Jimenez et al., 2004). In *The Dark Knight*, the Joker kidnaps two boats worth of people and threatens to kill them all if one boat does not decide to kill the other, not to mention the fact that

he blows up a hospital (Nolan, 2008). The Joker is also responsible for killing one of Batman's sidekicks, the second Robin (Jason Todd). The Joker confronts Todd, brutally beating the boy to within an inch of his life before finally killing him by blowing up the building in which he had just finally been reunited with his birth mother who he had previously believed to have been dead (Langley, 2012; Jimenez et al., 2004).

There have also been plenty of other times where the Joker lost his life. In one story arc, Nightwing finally has enough and kills the Joker, but Batman resuscitates him so that he still has to face the legal justice system (Jimenez et al., 2004). In an earlier story that was published in 1942, the Joker is finally sentenced to death for his crimes, but after being executed via the electric chair, his henchmen quickly revive him (Langley, 2012).

Canon Perspective

If one were to ask Batman why he does not kill the Joker, what would his answer be? His short answer would be that he does not kill, plain and simple, and that this rule also applies to the Joker. This is recognized throughout the canonical universe within which Batman resides and the vast majority of Batman portrayals that are not canonical. The long answer is a little more complicated. A few days after Bruce Wayne's parents were murdered, he swore to avenge their deaths and honor their memories by waging a war on criminals (Kane & Finger, 1939d). Batman honors the memory of his parents by bringing criminals to justice. If he killed those he hunted, he would not be honoring their memories. Batman does not attack people and commit acts of violence just to hurt people. The violent acts in and of themselves are not the end; the violence is merely a means to the end of bringing them or others to justice.

For example, Batman would not just go out and beat an abusive husband. Instead, Batman would bring him in to the custody of the police department and provide proof of the

attacks the man committed. He may have to get violent in order to bring him in, but it is merely used as a means to an end. Killing would be an end. If he kills, he is no longer achieving his desired objective of bringing criminals to justice. Killing would cause Batman's mission to transition from one of justice and honoring his parents to merely seeking vengeance and retribution. Batman seeks justice, not revenge. That is why he does not kill in the comics, and the Joker is included in that, as there are no exceptions.

On top of killing failing to meet his desired ends, killing would also be crossing a line that Batman is unwilling to cross. He is more than willing to use violence when necessary, but there is a line and a limit to what he will do. Certain things are allowable in his pursuit of criminal apprehension. Some things, however, would put him on the same level as the criminals he is seeking to stop, which is why he will not do them. To commit murder would be to cross a line into unjustifiable criminality, making Batman no better than those he hunts down and attempts to bring to justice. A great example of this in the comics is when Batman is considering killing the Joker when he believed that the Joker killed his best friend. "You and I have seen more than our fair share of tragedies and thirsted for revenge. If Batman wanted to be a killer, he could have started long ago. But, it's a line . . . If you cross that line . . . you'll be no different than [the Joker]," says Gordon. "I won't let him ruin [your life]." "Tonight," Batman thinks later, "I nearly became a part of that evil," (Loeb et al., 2009).

To sum things up, there are a number of reasons why the Batman of canon will not kill in general, let alone the Joker. First and foremost, he has a rule: do not kill. Additionally, to kill would be to dishonor the memory of his parents, which is the cause for his crusade in the first place. He would no longer be seeking to reach true justice, instead just out looking for revenge if he were to begin taking lives. Batman also does not kill because to do so would be to cross a line

that separates him from the criminals he fights, a line he does not wish to cross. Last but not least, Batman occasionally does not kill in the comics because others stop him, in moments (such as the one described above) where his urge to kill someone for something they have done is so great that he has to have reason talked into him by those closest to him. One way or another, though, there is always a reason for him not to kill.

Criminal Justice Perspective

Comparing Murder and Other Acts of Violence

It could be argued that there is a very big difference between murder and other acts of physical violence. While both inflict physical pain and harm, one results in the loss of life. This is the key distinction between the two acts. The act of committing either is oftentimes deemed illegal, although there are exceptions to that rule, such as self-defense. In general, though, citizens are not authorized to enact either form of physical aggression on others. While both may be illegal, the author of this paper believes that they are on different levels of illegality. One indicator of this is that murder and murder alone is punishable by death in the United States, whereas other forms of physical violence receive lesser punishments, relatively speaking.

In looking at the argument from this perspective, it can now be said that murder is *more* illegal than other forms of violence. That is not to say that violence should be considered legal, just less illegal than murder. This argument forms a very solid basis to explain Batman's behavior. As a vigilante who takes justice into his own hands, Batman is breaking the law, even though he does so in order to uphold it. To kill, however, would be more illegal than what he already does, and it is a distinct line that he does not want to cross. This argument is also validated by events within the comic world. In *Batman: Hush*, Commissioner Gordon uses this

same line of reasoning to convince Batman not to end the Joker's life after he believes he killed Dr. Tommy Elliott. In that moment, Gordon had this to say:

. . . it's a line. On one side we believe in the law. On the other . . . Sometimes, the law fails us. Maybe that's why I've understood you . . . Allowed you to help protect this city. Batman, if you cross that line . . . If you kill the Joker tonight . . . I will lead the hunt to bring you to justice. In the eyes of the law . . . In my eyes you'll be no different from him. (Loeb et al., 2009)

It is evident that Gordon sees murder and other violent acts as being very different types of illegal. One, violent acts that do not include murder, is allowed by the head of the Gotham City Police Department because he recognizes that their system is broken. Although begrudgingly, he allows Batman to operate as a vigilante because it is what needs to be done, and it assists the criminal justice system in Gotham. The other, murder, is not allowable in the eyes of Gordon, nor Gotham's criminal justice system by extension.

As such, Batman's character exists in a universe where the criminal justice system he seeks to uphold allows him to break certain laws, such as committing acts of physical violence, but not others, such as murder. It is this rule placed upon him by the criminal justice authorities, which is based on the differences in seriousness of offenses, which stops him from killing the Joker. To do so would cross a line that would change how Batman is perceived as a hero for justice, so that is one reason why Batman will not kill the Joker according to criminal justice perspectives.

Theories of Vigilantism

There is a surprising lack of academic attention paid to the phenomenon of vigilantism, and that which does exist generally discusses it as a social, group phenomenon (Abrahams, 1998,

p. 1). It still has yet to be determined if the presence of vigilante superheroes flooding the entertainment market for close to a century (but especially with a significant increase in the past decade) and constantly increasing in popularity will have an effect on this trend. The sources that do exist, however, can still provide a decent amount of insight on the topic so as to aid in the quest for an answer to the question at hand.

In a book published in 1998, Ray Abrahams stated that vigilantes have come about at different times and in different places to protect what they consider to be the good life from those who they feel are trying to rob them or their society of that, and, oftentimes, do so by force (p. 1). He goes on to state that the appeal of vigilantism lies in the idea of good, rational citizens who obey the law taking matters into their own hands. By committing these acts, they are doing what the justice system is incapable of doing when it fails to bring individuals to justice and provide them with the ability to work and live in peace (p. 3). As a result, he claims that vigilantes generally have a problem with the reigning criminal justice system. This vigilantism occupies a unique territory, straddling the line between that which is legal and that which is illegal. "Vigilantes often see themselves as breaking the law in order to respect it," says Abrahams (p. 153). William Culberson, a former sheriff, touched on that same argument nearly a decade earlier, stating, "a fine line exists between some criminal acts and some violent acts to further popular sovereignty." He goes on to elaborate, claiming that the dividing line between the two types of acts is determined by judging over time whether the acts were committed for private or for political purposes (Culberson, 1990, p. 9).

Abrahams goes on to discuss the relationship between the official justice system, with its laws defining what is right or wrong, and actual justice, as agreed upon by the people. This is a very big question for vigilantes, Batman included, because it provides the basis of the

justification for all of their actions. After all, that which is “just” is based off of a gut feeling that what one is doing is the right thing to do for many people. In his discussions on page 155, Abrahams also discusses first and second order rules. First order rules are those that outline which behaviors are allowed and which are not; second order rules focus, instead, on how to go about handling the rules in the first order, including rules on such topics as due process, jurisdiction, legislative processes, and so on. In general, vigilantes are willing to break second order rules in order to ensure that first order rules are respected and carried out. That which is illegal and that which is unacceptable are not always the same, and it is this argument that often comes to the aid of vigilantism (Abrahams, 1998).

Abrahams’ arguments regarding vigilantism help to answer the question of why Batman does not kill the Joker in a number of ways. Abrahams’ first argument is that vigilantes seek to protect their idea of the good life. Batman’s idea of the good life inevitably involves his family intact, which cannot occur because of the murder of his parents. Thus, his good life involves less murder. As such, for Batman to commit murder would oppose the entire idea behind vigilantism, according to Abrahams. The discussion of the position vigilantism holds also merits consideration in the context of Batman’s world. Batman respects the law, as Abrahams says, but breaks the law in order to uphold it. While this may seem contradictory, it makes more sense when we include Culberson’s points because it is easy to see which side of the imaginary dividing line between criminal acts and other violent acts Batman stands on. The notion that his crime fighting is a result of him trying to support the faulty justice system in Gotham rather than meet his own personal ends shows that Batman is on the correct side of that line, but killing would undoubtedly put him on the other side. Batman also fits the tenant of a good, law abiding citizen who is merely trying to do what social institutions of justice have failed to accomplish,

but killing would rob him completely of his law-abiding nature. Some would argue that the commission of any crime, big or small, murder or just plain violence, would in and of itself remove his status as a law abiding citizen, but Abrahams would disagree. When he goes on to discuss the different types of rules one can break, he creates a scenario in which Batman can break second order rules, such as the police being the only ones allowed to use force to apprehend criminals, in order to serve justice to those who break first order rules, such as the Joker when he kills someone. If Batman were to kill the Joker, he would be breaking a first order rule, and it is at that point that he would lose his classification as a law abiding member of society.

Perhaps most importantly, Abrahams discusses the idea that what is considered to be just stems from a gut feeling of what the right thing to do is. As has been discussed, Batman does not feel that it would be right for him to kill anyone, including the Joker, so doing so would be contrary to his gut feelings. These explanations and elaborations by Abrahams, when applied in this context to Batman, help explain a number of different factors contributing to why he does not kill the Joker.

Agent of the Law

There have been times throughout the course of Batman's existence where, instead of being a vigilante who operates outside of the law, Batman works alongside the police as an honorary member of their force. This is the Batman that is portrayed in the 1966 film and accompanying television series. When Catwoman, who is cleverly disguised as a Russian reporter, asks Batman to take off his mask for a photo and her request is denied, she states, "You are like the masked vigilantes in the westerns, no?" to which Commissioner Gordon replies, "Certainly not! Batman and Robin are fully deputized agents of the law." Robin follows up with,

“Support your police! That’s our message,” (Martinson, 1966). This film is not considered to be part of Batman’s canon mythos, so no direct events from the film are part of the accepted history. The ideas that went into creating this portrayal of Batman, however, are based upon the canonical Batman of that time period, meaning that the representation of Batman seen in the film mirrors the “real” Batman in ideology and status. This means that even though the movie is not a part of the canon, it can still act as an indicator of his status alongside law enforcement at that particular time.

As a deputized agent of the law, Batman’s goal is to aid the police department in their duties any way he can. Compare this to his more common role as a vigilante, where he feels that the police department’s results, for whatever reason, are insufficient and he seeks to take matters into his own hands. As a deputized agent, Batman works in the same capacity as an officer of the law. However, he holds great respect for other law enforcement officials and would not wish to overstep his bounds. He surely feels that killing the Joker would indeed cross a line. Despite the fact that law enforcement officials have the legal right to take a life under certain circumstances, Batman would not resort to such measures in his capacity out of respect for his position as an outsider of the police force.

Psychological Perspective

One of the main benefits of using the field of psychology to analyze a fictional character, such as the Joker, is that one can diagnose the character based off of perceived traits and characteristics. Once a diagnosis is formed, the character can be better understood and one can see how that character should be treated. According to Langley, however, the Joker defies diagnosis. He is clearly psychotic, but he does not fit neatly into any one specific diagnosis (Langley, 2012). Although psychology may be unable to pinpoint a diagnosis for one of Arkham

Asylum's craziest patients, the field can still help with the question at hand. The Joker and Batman share a very unique relationship, one which baffles and befuddles many people. The field of psychology can help to explain their interactions by examining the dynamic the two share.

Batman and the Joker are different sides of the same coin. The two characters could not be any more different, yet they are still remarkably similar. It could be argued that both are completely insane. Whereas one looks like a deformed clown and kills people by the masses, the other dresses up like a bat and skulks around dark alleys, beating people up. While that description may be overly generalized, it provides a good starting point for seeing how mentally similar these two characters just might be. Both Batman and the Joker carry their respective missions to the extreme, never stopping. Neither will ever give up; both are determined to make a lasting impact and difference, leaving behind a legacy no one will ever forget. Both of them are the people they are today because of one bad day, as the Joker puts it in *The Killing Joke* (Moore & Bolland, 2008). One bad day pushed them both over the edge, leaving them in a place that they could never return from, never to go back to who they were before their respective traumas occurred. These similarities could very well be the reason that Batman has not, does not, and will not kill the Joker and also why the Joker oftentimes feels he needs Batman.

Quite often, the Joker seems to need Batman in his life. There have been multiple instances where the Joker, either directly or indirectly, has admitted to this. In one graphic novel, the Joker states, "You can't kill me without becoming like me. I can't kill you without losing the only human being who can keep up with me. Isn't it IRONIC?!" (Morrison et al., 2014). Furthermore, one writer described the Joker's need for Batman as such: "Cut down the

Bat and you simultaneously diminish the Joker, as the continued existence of an unbeatable, unflappable Batman defines the Joker's life by opposition," (Summers, n.d.).

This also helps to illustrate why Batman does not kill the Joker in turn. As the Joker needs Batman to be his foil, so too does Batman need the Joker. "Perhaps it's not our friends, but our enemies that define us," (Cannon, 2015). Batman's goal is to wage a war on crime, to defeat the criminal element. This mission seems so much grander, so much more important, so much worthier a cause when the enemy is on the scale of the Joker. While it is true that Batman could rid Gotham of muggers, beat up all of the drug dealers, and round up all of the average criminals for the Gotham City Police Department, he may feel that it would not be enough. By setting his sights upon the Joker, Batman has given himself a target that is worthy of his mission. If Batman were to kill the Joker, however, he would be back to square one. There are plenty of other supervillains that Batman could later turn his attention to, but no one could possibly give him the kind of opposition that he encounters from the Joker, something he would lose if ever he killed him. He cannot fight the Joker while the Joker is imprisoned or in the insane asylum, but there is always the (likely) chance that he will escape, so the threat still exists. That threat is completely lost if Batman kills him, so Batman's own crusade would also be diminished by the loss of the Joker.

Batman and the Joker may appear to be more opposite than any other two people to have ever existed are, yet they also share many striking similarities. The differences between them drive them to continuous confrontations, always violent, oftentimes nearly lethal, yet it is the similarities and the need for one another in their lives that keeps them from crossing the line, from going over the edge and killing each other. This was perfectly summed up toward the end of the second film in director Christopher Nolan's Batman trilogy, *The Dark Knight*. After the

final battle between the Joker and Batman takes place and Batman saves him from falling to his death, the Joker is left hanging upside down from the top of a building, talking to Batman before the police take him into custody.

You . . . You just couldn't let me go, could you? This is what happens when an unstoppable force meets an immovable object. You truly are incorruptible, aren't you? Huh? You won't kill me out of some misplaced sense of self-righteousness. And I won't kill you because you're just too much fun. I think you and I are destined to do this forever. (Nolan, 2008)

This statement sums up the psychology of the two's relationship across all mediums quite nicely and serves as a near-perfect example of the true relationship that the two share.

Philosophical Perspective

The field of philosophy deals with a wide array of questions, seeking not necessarily to find answers but instead looking for new ways to consider problems. It is this interest in examining a question in different ways that will aid the current research. Unlike those who study the physical sciences, philosophers oftentimes find themselves stuck attempting to figure out solutions to problems that do not lend themselves to trial and error in the real world. As such, philosophers have had to create their own ways of studying and experimenting to attempt to make new lines of thinking. They use what they refer to as thought experiments, which are essentially hypothetical situations designed to incorporate a given problem so that one can mentally work it out and see what would come of different actions, constantly having the ability to go back and revise the answer or the method utilized. One thought experiment that will greatly assist in examining the question at hand is the Trolley Problem (Levy, n.d.).

The Trolley Problem

The Trolley Problem is a thought experiment that was initially created by Philippa Foot and then expanded upon by other philosophers and moral psychologists. In this particular thought experiment, the situation is as follows: there is a trolley going down the tracks, and ahead of the trolley there are five people on the tracks. The five individuals ahead do not see the trolley coming, and will not have time to get safely out of the way if they are warned of the oncoming vehicle. As such, the trolley will surely kill all five individuals. There is a bystander, however, who is located next to a lever that could divert the trolley to a different track. As chance would have it, there is one person standing on the other track who also would not have time to get out of the way. The question posed by this thought experiment is whether or not the bystander should divert the trolley to a different track (Levy, n.d.; White, 2011).

This is a very difficult thought experiment, as what it is really asking participants to do is decide whether they will allow five people to die through inaction or actively take the life of one person. This thought experiment also offers the perfect parallel for the relationship between Batman and the Joker. If Batman does nothing, the Joker will inevitably kill more people, thus a number of people die through inaction. Alternatively, Batman could take the Joker's life to save the others, thus actively taking a single life.

Mark White does point out some differences between the original Trolley Problem and the variation involving Batman and the Joker. First, all participants in the original Trolley Problem are considered to be morally equal, meaning that there is no reason to believe that any of their lives are better or worse, or more or less valuable, than any of the others. In the comic variation, however, the Joker is clearly not morally equal to anyone else due to his heinous crimes. As such, it seemingly becomes even easier to "pull the lever" and kill the Joker, yet

Batman still does not do this. Secondly, the Joker (mirroring the lone individual on the track the trolley could be diverted to) is actually the one putting the others in danger (White, 2011). In the Trolley Problem, it is assumed that everyone is there independently of one another. In the case of Batman and the Joker, however, victims do not die by chance; they die because of the Joker's own actions. Both of these differences seem to make killing the Joker the preferred choice, but some would disagree. Two opposing schools of thought, deontology and utilitarianism, provide different answers to the Trolley Problem and whether or not Batman should kill the Joker.

Deontology

Deontology is a school of thought that judges actions without consideration for their results. Deontologists never believe that the ends justify the means; to them, the means are the only thing worth consideration. The consequences of an act are of no importance, whether they be good or bad. All acts must be judged solely by the intrinsic characteristics of the said act without considering any other factors (White, 2011).

Deontologists believe that murder is wrong, regardless of any supposed good that may come from any particular murder (the only exception being self-defense, when no other alternative, such as escape, exists). As such, their answer to the Trolley Problem is that the bystander not only should not, but also cannot, morally pull the lever to switch the trolley to the other track because they would be actively taking a life. Since deontologists think that murder is wrong regardless of the circumstances, this answer seems logical based off of their school of thought. Applying this same principle to Batman and the Joker, deontologists would still claim that Batman cannot kill the Joker, despite all of the good that would no doubt come from this one evil action.

Utilitarianism

In opposition to deontology, utilitarianism is a school of thought that considers the results of an act, not the individual action itself, in order to determine whether or not the act is good or bad. If an act has a greater positive effect on a greater number of people than its negative effects, then utilitarians consider the act to be good. If more overall harm than good comes from the act, then the act is considered bad by utilitarians. The general idea is that utilitarians seek to do the most good for the most people overall, and if some bad could lead to even more good, then it is acceptable. The goal is to maximize the total possible happiness or well-being that could result from an action (White, 2011).

Based off of this idea, utilitarians believe that a bystander should be expected to pull the lever, as they would be maximizing the potential good that could come from the situation because only one life is lost instead of five, producing a net gain of four compared to a net loss of four. Utilitarians would also expect Batman to kill the Joker. After all of the lives he has taken and all of the lives he will surely take in the future, a true utilitarian would see no situation in which the Joker being killed was not a good thing.

More Questions than Answers

As is oftentimes the case with philosophy, the Trolley Problem thought experiment does not provide an answer as to whether or not Batman should kill the Joker, but it does attempt to illuminate some possible reasons as to why he does not kill him. Deontologists believe that killing is wrong, no matter the circumstances or the good that may come of it. This is incredibly similar to Batman's ideology. However, deontologists believe that all acts, not just murder, should be judged based upon their means and not their ends. This means that they would also be against physically assaulting an individual in order to get information from him that could aid in

saving someone else's life. This opposes the rest of Batman's actions, as he has no problem with becoming violent when he deems it necessary. As such, Batman cannot be considered a true deontologist.

Utilitarians would commend Batman for assaulting individuals to get information, as his work regularly provides results for the city of Gotham. He will not kill, though, so utilitarians would say he is at least partially responsible for all future crimes committed by criminals he apprehends instead of executes. Because of this, Batman cannot be considered to be a true utilitarian, either. Finding Batman somewhere in the middle of the two schools of thought, the quest to determine why he does not kill the Joker does not find its answer in the realm of philosophy. Using philosophical tools such as the Trolley Problem and different schools of thought such as deontology and utilitarianism, however, can still be useful in providing a more complete picture to examine.

Summation Explanation

At the onset of this project, the author sought to find the definitive answer to the question of why Batman does not kill the Joker. The research, however, has shown that there is no one definitive answer to that question. Holistic answers are indeed possible, and answers do exist, but a single, definitive answer is not present. Despite this, all of the different reasons presented can still combine to make an over-arching answer. The status of Batman as a fictional character, however, prevents any true level of definitiveness to this answer, and even if one could be made, it could easily change as more and more happens in Batman's ongoing universe.

The key, then, to answering the question at hand is to find an answer that works for the individual. As a fictional character, Batman's main purpose is to entertain. He exists on paper and in film, but he does not exist in the real world. His sole job as a character is to bring

enjoyment to as many people as possible that he encounters in any one of his many forms, so success here lies in providing an answer that makes any given reader happy or brings them the most joy. If one would be happiest if Batman did kill the Joker, then one could focus on stories where he does just that. Others may like to think that Batman truly is incorruptible, as the Joker says, so they will look to *The Dark Knight* or *Hush* to see examples of Batman refraining from killing him. Yet more people may choose to believe that Batman does not kill the Joker because of how well they complement each other, or because it would simply be wrong, or illegal, or immoral. Whichever theory one would like to believe, a plethora of evidence exists to back that theory up; one need only look.

The author of this paper has decided to combine all of these theories into one summation explanation that takes bits and pieces of all that is presented herein to come to his own answer: Batman does not kill the Joker because it would be wrong. It is as simple as that. The reason it would be wrong is where all of the different theories come in. If he were to kill the Joker, Batman would dishonor his parents; it would cross a line he is unwilling to cross; it would make his actions transition from socially acceptable to criminal; it would remove him from his place in between deontology and utilitarianism, sliding him to one extreme. None of that would feel right to Batman. He is a hero. He fights for justice. He rights wrongs, and he is relentless in his pursuit of the criminal element, but some things would just be too much. Batman does not kill the Joker because it would be wrong.

Dissent

Irrelevance of Canonicity

Batman killed the Joker. Numerous examples of this have been shown, but none of them have been canonical instances. Therefore, Batman has both killed and not killed the Joker.

However, since there have been instances of Batman killing the Joker, it could be said that there is no argument for why Batman does not kill the Joker, because he has. This paper has made its arguments on the basis of canonicity as a personal choice; others may not make this same choice. There are those out there who may choose to look at Batman as a whole character and include every instance of said character, including every last one of his actions. To these people, Batman not only kills the Joker, but is also a hypocrite and a liar every time he tells someone else that killing is wrong or that he does not do it. While the author of this paper disagrees with that statement, it is definitely one possible conclusion that others may reach. In their opinions, if Batman kills the Joker even once, then the deed is done and there is no going back, even if it did not technically happen in the canonical universe. To them, there is no question of why Batman does not kill the Joker, because he does.

The Killing Joke

The Killing Joke is one of the most controversial Batman stories ever told for a number of reasons. First, it may be implied that the Joker rapes Barbara Gordon, who was Batgirl at the time; even if she is not raped, she is shot, paralyzed, stripped, and photographed. All of this occurs not to punish or attack Barbara, but merely to use her as a pawn to get to her father, disrespecting her. Many argue from the feminist perspective that this is disrespectful toward all women and the way she is treated throughout the story is disgraceful. Secondly, the ending of this particular graphic novel is exceptionally ambiguous, ending, most likely, in either Batman killing the Joker or the two of them sharing a laugh over a joke. Despite the greater social relevance of the first controversy, it is the second issue that will be the focus of this section solely due to its relation to the topic of this paper.

Although initially written as a one-shot story that was not to be considered as part of the canon, *The Killing Joke* has since made its way into Batman's canon. This story provided a deeper insight into the character of the Joker, a plausible backstory for him, an in-depth examination of the relationship between Batman and the Joker, and the attack on Barbara Gordon that would leave her paralyzed, an event that would have ramifications throughout the DC Universe. All of these items began to appear and be mentioned in other stories, and it was these references that eventually dragged *The Killing Joke* into canon. As a part of canon, Batman could not kill the Joker at the end of the story, as he appears in later issues with no explanation of miraculous rebirth. Since the original story was not intended to be canon, however, its true ending really is unknown, despite an abundance of speculation from countless parties (as evidenced by any number of forums and discussions available on the internet via a quick search of the topic).

If Batman does indeed kill the Joker at the end of the story, the question of this paper becomes mute for many people, as was discussed in the previous section (see Irrelevance of Canonicity). While many stories leave many questions left unanswered, this one in particular stands out above the rest. The ending is so unquestionably ambiguous that it has sparked debate for nearly a quarter of a century with no end in sight.

Batman Should Kill the Joker

Strong arguments can also be made for the idea that Batman *should* kill the Joker, although the author of this paper would again disagree. Just like the question of why Batman does not kill the Joker, the question of whether or not he should does not have a straight-forward answer, either. Many have opinions one way or the other, despite the unavailability of any definitive conclusion.

On one episode of AMC's hit reality show *Comic Book Men*, the employees of the store debate this very topic. Mike Zapcic feels that Batman should indeed kill the Joker as punishment for all of the crimes he has committed. Bryan Johnson agrees, further stating that if he were Batman, he would be incredibly frustrated with the fact that the prisons and insane asylums seem incapable of maintaining custody of the Joker and would feel the need to kill the Joker, as it seems to be the only thing that would actually work to subdue his criminal acts (Smith, 2014).

Those who have helped contribute to Batman over the years have also occasionally weighed in on the debate. In an interview from New York Comic Con, artist Greg Cappullo claims that he would have killed the Joker long ago (if he were Batman). He thinks that if Batman just let loose and did it, he would feel great, and the Joker would not be able to hurt anyone else (DC Entertainment, 2012).

Applicability

Comic books and the characters they create, contain, and provide are first and foremost methods of entertainment. For most people, they do not go beyond that. What too many fail to realize, however, is that comic books can serve as amazing educational and/or academic resources and starting points for many academic discussions. Comic books can be applicable to the real world in two major ways. Real world theories can be used to study comics, as was the case with this paper, or comics can be used to study real world problems.

Batman as a Tool for Studying the Social Sciences

This paper utilized different social science perspectives to examine and study the fictional character of Batman, specifically why he does not kill the Joker. By utilizing a fictional character for these examinations, one is able to take theories and examine them in a practical sense, looking at how they apply in a situation, albeit a hypothetical one. Much like the thought

experiments of philosophy, comics can act as social experiments to see what happens, how individuals react, and what the consequences and ramifications may be for any given action.

Rather than using the social sciences to study Batman, one could also use Batman to study the social sciences. For example, Batman can be of great aid to researchers in the fields utilized herein, namely criminal justice and criminology, psychology, and philosophy. Batman comics could be used as a starting point for researchers to study, examine, and revise current laws regarding citizen's arrests and what abilities and responsibilities individuals not involved with law enforcement have in upholding the law. Batman's relationship with the Joker, which was a key facet of this research, could also be used by psychologists to examine how opposing individuals interact, and how these interactions play out when left to their own devices. As a final example, Batman can also help philosophers by making thought experiments less abstract, as was done in a previous section of this paper.

Comics as a Guide for Looking at Life's Big Questions

Instead of simply using actual theories and ideas to examine comic books, however, one can also use comic books in general to examine issues in the real world. Is killing acceptable? What about vigilantism? Can one man make a difference in his city, or even his world? These are difficult questions, and ones that appear in the everyday lives of people all around the world, yet the answers are not always easy to come by. Comic books can be of great aid when these questions come up. They provide examples of behavior, role models for people, and ideas of right and wrong to the masses; ". . . superhero stories speak loudly and boldly to our greatest fears, deepest longings, and highest aspirations," says author Grant Morrison. He also discusses the idea that comic books and superheroes have great potential in that they can utilize exciting, dramatic stories to illustrate complex ideas, and believes that, as role models, they can teach as

much about life as real people can. Summing it up quite elegantly, Morrison also writes that superheroes remind us of who we are while also showing us who we want to be (2011).

Conclusion

This project had two main objectives. The first was to attempt to definitively answer the question of why Batman does not kill the Joker, and the second was to provide a viable demonstration of the academic potential of comic books and superheroes. Both were successful, just to different degrees. While one definitive answer was not found, many possible answers were created and a holistic answer took shape. This answer will not work or be accepted by everyone, but it works for the author's purpose. As for the second objective, success is undeniable. Multiple academic disciplines and theories were utilized to study and examine comic book literature, and the same comic book literature was then used to look at the social sciences, creating an exchange between the two that showcases how entertainment and academia do not have to be two distinct entities that cannot intersect. While many may feel that comics are juvenile and for the uneducated masses, or that they serve no true purpose beyond that of mindless entertainment, and are thus displeased by the ever-growing prevalence of the genre in popular culture and society, there is a quote from one of the leading comic book writers of the modern era that answers that point quite nicely: "It should give us hope that superhero stories are flourishing everywhere because they are a bright flickering sign of our need to move on, to imagine the better, more just, and more proactive people we can be," (Morrison, 2011, p. 414).

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